

Consultation on the draft BBC Editorial Guidelines 2024

Response from the Countryside Alliance

1) Are the draft Guidelines clear and straightforward?

1. The draft Guidelines run to a total of 300 pages, which it would be difficult to declare 'straightforward' regardless of their content. That said, the Guidelines deal with a broad range of highly complex and difficult issues, and it is only in describing them at length that clarity can be achieved. Under the circumstances the draft Guidelines appear to be as straightforward as could reasonably be expected.

2) Do they set out appropriate editorial standards for those making BBC programmes and content?

2. We appreciate that the draft Guidelines attempt (s. 2.4.29) to address the issue of impartiality across the totality of BBC output as opposed to strictly within an individual segment or programme. We understand that it would be impractical to expect every individual segment to be entirely impartial, if the term is taken to mean reflecting all or even the main conflicting viewpoints. The interests of impartiality can often be better served by ensuring that other segments or programmes reflect alternative viewpoints, so that impartiality can be achieved across BBC output on the whole.
3. We do believe, however, that the current draft Guidelines either frame this issue too narrowly or are expressed in terms that give the appearance of framing it more narrowly than was intended. The scope of the policy is described as "*long running or continuous output*", whereas the examples cited are limited to "*general daily news programmes, the BBC News channel, the BBC News website and social channels*". The policy should apply beyond daily news programming to encompass broader current affairs output, as the initial scoping statement suggests. Assuming that this section is intended to apply to all long-running current affairs programming and not just news and online output, additional examples are required to reflect that position. A long-running current affairs programme such as Countryfile would be a suitable addition.
4. We also believe that, in the current draft, the scope of this policy is too narrow in any case. It should apply to the generality of BBC output, not just to individual long-running programmes. Where the BBC chooses to commission a programme that presents a distinct, partisan viewpoint, it should take care to ensure that alternative perspectives are presented in other BBC output.

5. With regard to section 4 on conflicts of interest, and especially section 4.4 on guidance for BBC personnel, our primary concerns relate to enforcement and the question of which personnel the BBC considers the Guidelines as applying to.
6. We have seen multiple instances of artificial distinctions being drawn among presenters of BBC programmes between employees and contractors, or 'regular' and 'recurrent' presenters, and then used to justify inaction against partial and partisan behaviour by presenters based on the nature of their employment contracts or how often they happen to appear. Such distinctions are irrelevant to viewers.
7. The draft Guidelines appear to suggest a rigorous set of policies to tackle external interests and activities that could affect BBC impartiality, and that they will apply to everyone everywhere in the BBC, regardless of such artificial distinctions. The problem is that the BBC's track record on enforcement has given scant cause for confidence that the Guidelines will be upheld, particularly when they meet hard cases involving celebrity presenters or others whom BBC managers wish to continue to employ.
8. Indeed, the draft Guidelines are unclear as to the circumstances under which presenters will be disciplined for breaching them. The only firm statement it makes on enforcement upon individuals is *"Failure to comply with these Guidelines or to follow the related guidance may result in action being taken."* On that basis it appears entirely plausible that BBC management might decide to take no action in response to some or any breaches.
9. We appreciate the statement within the consultation document that *"The BBC will not consider responses, or elements of responses, that seek to re-open an issue or complaint on which the BBC or Ofcom has previously reached a final decision."* Our following remarks do not seek to do so. They serve instead to highlight instances where BBC enforcement of past editorial guidelines has been problematic.
10. Longstanding complaints we have had with, and made against, the BBC have turned less on the content of editorial guidelines than their observance. Although it would be a separate piece of work to review it, the BBC's complaints process is byzantine and seemingly designed less to enable just outcomes than to obfuscate. When a complaint is pursued through to conclusion, torturous reasoning has been applied to justify what appear to be transparent breaches of editorial guidelines, such as the invented distinction between 'regular' and 'recurrent' presenters that has been relied on in the case(s) of Chris Packham.

11. The recent controversy over Gary Lineker – where the BBC initially sought to sanction him for flagrant breaches of presenter impartiality duties in his social media activity, but then backed down when, in protest, some of his fellow presenters refused to do their jobs – suggests that the BBC has become addicted to a culture of celebrity among its own presenters. It has put them on pedestals and left them untouchable. In 2020 Tim Davie said, *“If you want to be an opinionated columnist or a partisan campaigner on social media then that is a valid choice, but you should not be working at the BBC,”* but on the first occasion his resolve was seriously tested it proved to be chimerical.

12. If the BBC is serious about putting impartiality first, it needs to do more than just moving that section of the draft Guidelines up to the top. It needs to make known to its presenters that they are not indispensable, and it needs to be ready and willing to dispense with those who do not wish to comply.

3) Do they sufficiently reflect the changes in the media landscape since the last review in 2019?

13. Remarks in the draft Guidelines concerning portfolio careers and their relationship with policy on conflicts of interest appear to reflect the growth of these career paths, in media and more broadly, since 2019. We welcome that reflection but reiterate our earlier comments.

14. It remains to be seen whether the substantive change the draft Guidelines introduces, requiring early referral to a senior editorial figure, will be sufficient to address audience concerns about presenters whose personal platforms arose primarily from their roles at the BBC using those platforms to behave in ways, and express views, that suggest a tendency towards partiality.

15. We also note that this section specifies its application as to instances *“[w]here people who work for the BBC develop portfolio careers involving external roles”*. It is unclear whether it is intended to apply to personnel who have already developed portfolio careers involving external roles or whether, consequently, the prescribed referrals to a senior editorial figure will be done retrospectively in the cases of those individuals. We believe that it should so apply. If the referral process has value, it would make no difference whether personnel were looking newly to assume an external role or had done so in the past.